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## **Scotland Emergent: PART TWO: The birth of the “Democratic Intellect”**

**Alan Riach**

**In the second of four essays on the foundations of Scottish literature, Alan Riach takes us from Columba to George Buchanan, writing in the Latin tradition.**

As we saw last week, Columba is a foundational figure in the development of a myth of kinship among the different peoples of Scotland. His travels to the north of Scotland to the territory of the Picts (whom scholarship suggests were also Celtic) might be described as original in the tradition of “peregrination” – the wandering missionary – but they also resulted in the legacy of stories about the traveler whose various encounters suggest an affinity between the different peoples he meets. Through his narrative, many differences become related to each other. They are all threaded on the line of his journeying, which arises from the geographical diversity of Scotland, the land itself. This is one of the virtues of Adomnan’s biography: about 140 different stories illuminate different aspects of Columba’s character.

There are poems attributed to Columba, most notably the “Altus Prosator”, written in Latin. The translation by Edwin Morgan catches the rolling, emphatic rhythms and rhymes of the original and follows its structure, each verse beginning with the letters of the alphabet, taking you from A to Z as you go from Creation to Fall to Last Judgement, including a vision of Hell. This is the last stanza:

Zabulus burns to ashes all those adversaries  
who deny that the Saviour was Son to the Father  
but we shall fly to meet him and immediately greet him  
and be with him in the dignity of all such diversity  
as our deeds make deserved and we without swerve  
shall live beyond history in the state of glory.

That phrase, “the dignity of all such diversity” gives us the clue to it all. Following the alphabet but reinventing the story in fresh poetry is also a balanced way to answer the question between the priorities of predestined structure and the exercise of free will.

There is a great deal of early work in this tradition from Iona and elsewhere but Columba’s influence extends into contemporary and later work in Gaelic. Dallan Forgaill, who flourished around 597 AD, in his “Elegy for Columba” memorably says that the world without him is like a harp without a key – as if the world itself were a musical instrument and Columba’s great virtue was allowing its music to sing out, appropriately tuned, exact in its tension and playability.

If Columba is widely known as an adopted Scot arriving from Ireland, it’s less widely acknowledged that St Patrick was quite possibly a Scot who moved to Ireland. Here, though, all I’d like to do is highlight the famous dialogues between St Patrick and Ossian, which refer back to the heroic days of the Celtic warriors. They describe a confrontation between the ancient, secular, pagan world and the modern, pious, sacralised world. The old world is viewed with more than nostalgia: it is a land of youthful self-confidence, stamina and appetite, as any old person might recollect. The new world might give little comfort to this act of aged remembering but the evocation of the old world in some of the poems from these dialogues remains as crystal-clear as the sea around Iona, on a good day.

The Columban church and the Celtic Christianity it embodied seems to have been confronted by the centralising orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic church after Columba’s death. Some would say that the dispute was essentially about the dating of Easter and the proper way to have your hair cut but there was surely more to it than that. John Purser notes, “the Celtic church was distinct in philosophy, organisation, language use, literary style, aspects of order of service, calendrical calculation, physical appearance of its monks, appearance of its script, form of the cross, and, now, the character of its music in so far as it has survived in the Inchcolm Antiphoner.” Whatever the intricacies of its distinctive identity, the outcome of the confrontation with the increasingly centralised religious structure was that the establishment orthodox Roman church prevailed and the priorities of Celtic attention to the local were put under pressure. But literature – any art worth having – always comes from real people in actual places, never from centralised dictat. The lesson is there for us, clear to see.

Columba was one of a number of characters whose lives became the subjects of hagiographies or proto-biographies, in later centuries. These include, from the 12th century, lives of St Nynia or Ninian, St Kentigern or Mungo and St Margaret. These figures all still have specific local associations in Scotland. The Holy Island, off the coast of Arran near Lamlash, was the home of St Molaise (or Laisren, to give him his Irish name) and his cave can still be visited and you can drink from the well of pure water beside it. In Glasgow, when you visit the Cathedral, you can go down to Mungo's crypt. When you travel west along the Clyde to Dumbarton Rock, the ancient capital of Al Clud, later called Strathclyde, you will be standing where Mungo is supposed to have met Merlin. In legend, the Rock is also associated with Mordred, villain of the Arthurian stories. The name Dumbarton means the fortress of the Britons, that is, the Celts who spoke Old Welsh or Cymric, the language in which our earliest poem, *The Gododdin*, is written. Modern research has unearthed music and texts from the early Christian periods and recordings have been made of Columban plainchant and the vespers and matins for the feast of St Kentigern. In the 20th century, the composer Thomas Wilson (1927-2001) in his *St Kentigern Suite* (1986), beautifully commemorated the legends depicted in the crest of the city of Glasgow:

This is the bird that never flew

This is the tree that never grew

This is the bell that never rang

This is the fish that never swam

In the stories of Mungo, each of these negative images registers a problem which the saint solves. Wilson's music intensely and understatedly represents that: each piece gives us a knotted problem and then, its resolution. Edwin Morgan, in a poem that is chiselled into the pavement in Candleriggs, a street in the Merchant City just south-east of Glasgow's George Square, takes these images and makes strange and intriguing affirmations of them:

Praise for the tree that growled but grew

Praise for the bird that fainted but flew

Praise for the bell that rusted but rang

Praise for the fish that sighed but swam

When Morgan collected the poems written when he held the appointment of poet laureate of Glasgow in the early 21st century, he published them in a book called *Cathures*, the name by which Jocelyn of Furness referred to Glasgow in his 12th-century biography of Mungo. So these early Christian figures have a long legacy in Scottish literature.

So does the language they wrote in. There are various major sources for literature in the Latin tradition, including pre-eminently the *Scotichronicon* (1440-47) by Walter Bower (1385-1449), written in sixteen books, or the *Scotorum Historiae*, published in Paris in 1527, written by Hector Boece (c.1465-c.1536), and including the *Agricola* of Tacitus, which we'll come to later. But Latin has a longer tradition in Scottish literature. Historical accounts include that of John Leslie (1527-96), Catholic bishop of Ross (George Buchanan's Protestant contemporary), the *Rerum Scoticarum Historiae* (Edinburgh, 1582).

George Buchanan (1506–82) was one of the most significant literary and political figures of the 16th century: poet, playwright, historian, intellectual humanist scholar, teacher of the great French essayist Michel de Montaigne, Mary Queen of Scots and later of her son, the boy who was to become King James VI of Scotland and I of the United Kingdom. Buchanan was a native Gaelic speaker from near lower Loch Lomond, who was deeply impressed that the Gaels had held onto their language and culture for more than two thousand years. He was a Catholic who committed himself to the Reformation, joined the Reformed Protestant church in the 1560s and published *De Jure Regni apud Scotos* in 1579 .

This is one of the most important books in – what shall we say? – all British? (or all European?) literature? – it is arguably the most essential text in our understanding of the constitution and the state. How many of us have heard of it, let alone read it? It follows the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) in saying that all political power resides in the people, and it must reside in the people, and that it is lawful and necessary to resist kings (or queens, or, we might say, all rulers, and all their minions and myrmidons) if (or when) they become tyrants. Buchanan was basing his argument at least partly on his understanding of the clan system.

There were numerous attempts to suppress this work in the century following its publication, not least by the king he'd tutored. The contemporary poet and novelist James Robertson (b.1958), in "George Buchanan in Old Age" from the sequence *Stirling Sonnets* (2001), writes that he "foresaw / where stupid Stewart vanity would lead" and suggests the practice of the "Democratic Intellect" he embodied:

Well-wishers, calling in his dying days,  
found him, far from complacency or sleep,  
teaching a servant how to read, and still  
the intellect flashed in his icy gaze:  
"Far better this," says he, "nor stealing sheep,  
or sitting idle, which I count as ill."

As a poet, Buchanan's "Epithalamium for the Dauphin of France and Mary" celebrates the marriage of Mary Queen of Scots; he translated Euripides' *Medea* and *Alcestis*, while his own plays, *Jephthah* and *The Baptist*, were translated in the 20th century by Robert Garioch. He was a virtuoso of poetic forms, a master of rude and irreverent poems as well as odes, satires, elegies and epigrams, and an exemplary figure for Garioch, who prized the Latin Humanist tradition.

So did the philosopher George Davie. Davie's seminal book *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) is underpinned by the Humanist tradition in Scottish education. Davie produced direct translations from the Latin which Hugh MacDiarmid used in his versions of Buchanan's poems published in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1941); he did the same with the Latin poem "A Fisher's Apology" by Arthur Johnstone (c.1577-1641), also included there. By insisting on having such translations in his anthology, MacDiarmid was demonstrating the multi-lingual nature of Scotland's literary history, a fact that has been accepted by later anthologists but rarely taken up in general education or mass media.

The two major collections of Scottish Latin poetry are the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* (edited by Johnstone, published in Amsterdam in 1637), containing the work of thirty-seven poets (excluding Buchanan) and the third volume of *Musa Latina Aberdoniensis* (edited by Geddes and Leask, Aberdeen, 1892-1916), which contains the work of thirty-two poets. The full scholarly job of translating them fresh for the 21st century has yet to be done.

While George Buchanan and Arthur Johnstone are the most familiar names in this tradition, and Buchanan is certainly a major figure in the European cultural context, they are not the only ones. The field is enormous and rich, still to yield many treasures. Among them, Archibald Pitcairne (1652-1713) is fascinating: poet and playwright, satirising Presbyterianism in the play *The Assembly* (written 1692, not published until 1722), combining a love plot with an exposé of religious rhetorical humbug centred on the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Hypocrisy and bigotry are the main targets and Pitcairne places himself consciously in the tradition of David Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*. Pitcairne's elegy for John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee, was translated by John Dryden.

The 17th century has most often been characterised as relatively barren for Scottish literature, an era in which religious faction and political violence was rife, but the achievement of the Latin authors speaks of a different cultural quality altogether. Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601) was the author of the great sonnet written in Scots, "Cupid and Venus" which we looked at closely a few months ago ("Crossing the border of 1603", *The National*, Friday March 17, 2017) but he wrote most of his work in Latin, and this remains to be fully appreciated. Our sense of what the entire literary history of the period amounts to may be revised radically once a comprehensive reappraisal of the whole body of work in Latin by Scots has been accomplished.

In other words, we can trace the tradition of Scottish literature in Latin back to very ancient times, and it comes forward across centuries. This is a mere indication of a body of work whose value remains almost unknown to readers and writers today. What's keeping us from it?